

WHAT THIS CITY NEEDS IS A GOOD FIVE CENT HISTORIAN

INTRODUCTION

This is the second year in a row that I have recommended a zero percent (0%) in funding for the Office of City Historian. (Actually expenses requested last year decreased 10% from the previous year).

Three budget cycles ago we moved to a level that would allow us to gradually undo decades of neglect and move us into a position of being able to carry out core governmental functions regarding history required by law or plain common sense.

We are well embarked on that course and if we stay on it, **I foresee we can obtain those goals with 0% increases over the next three to five (3 – 5) budget cycles.**

Which means that **the cost of this office will continue to be less than .000278 (3/10th of 1%) of the City Budget, or 4/10th of a penny per \$1000.00 assessed: a nickel for each \$125.000 assessed.** (Those figures based on last year's budget: therefore, as the overall City budget goes up each year and office expenses remain the same, the percentages actually decrease) (Equivalent to a decrease by the amount of inflation each year).

We've been able to do all this by operating within the parameters you established three cycles ago and by setting a new standard of fiscal and personal responsibility for the office.

FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY

The yearly utilization rate of funds budgeted for this office is approximately 98%

No expense of this office has ever failed to pass muster on one of your audits.

A transfer from other funds has never been requested or required.

Volunteer services, donations and grants are used to the greatest degree possible. When donations are received that can be applied to "City" functions, they are, and funds used for "City" purposes: for example, the donation of approximately \$500.00 dollars worth of library equipment made available the funding of the Amsterdam Veterans Medal, without having to seek additional funding from the Common Council .

The yearly budget is developed as part of an overall plan so that expenses are phased over several years, allowing growth in function without growth in expenditure.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

I am the first City Historian to insist on being treated as an employee, not a consultant: to be sworn and subject to public officer law, to have taxes deducted from my pay, to keep regular office hours.

I am the first City Historian to maintain regular contact with the County and State Historians, as required by law, as well as with other appropriate local, county, and state agencies.

I am available weekends and evenings as well as work days to assist any individual or agency – governmental or not – who requests the historical assistance: Veterans, Planning, APD, Amsterdam Reads, DAR, Walter Elwood Museum, etc.

When offered fees for any of the above, if it is within the City, I generally turn them back to the organization; outside of the City, I take them and apply them to City purposes.

A portion of my book (written about Amsterdam, but not on city time or using city resources) royalties goes to the Amsterdam Veterans Memorial.

SALARY:

My salary is currently \$5,000.00 per year, which at two days a week for 50 weeks works out to be \$6.125/hour. This is \$1.125/hour less than the federal and state minimum wage.

There is no overtime, compensatory time, insurance, retirement, or other benefits.

Like you, I actually work more than 16 hours a week on city business, but the two days is based on one day for office hours and appointments, and one day for remedial work: establishing the city archives, creating files, etc.

Two budget cycles ago I came to you and asked to be boosted to two days a week because there had simply been nothing done in the past in terms of establishing, organizing and maintaining the basic files and documents required under the law. You approved.

As I told you at the time, moving to two days a week would not only cause me to cut back a day at my regular employment, but automatically require me to leave management there and resume a standard employee's hourly compensation. I did not ask for a strict compensation for this, only a slightly more than doubling of what I had been earning at one day a week with the city). I did so upon your authorization, without any protection of union or state employee law, believing we were committed to a mutual goal.

According to a survey taken by the Association of Public Historians of the State of New York taken about four years ago, the average salary of a public historian was then about \$6,500.00/year.

Notwithstanding all of the above, I am ready and willing to join the Mayor, Common Council members , and other public officials who are willing to go beyond a zero increase and take an across-the-board temporary pay cut.

EXPENSES:

No "City" money is used for "nice to have" projects or programs. Donations are used for those.

I even purchased my own computer and printer for use at City Hall rather than requesting funding that was more needed for shelving, files, reference materials, and other basic tools.

Other than the above type materials, other expenses are for interpretative labels, framing, and similar.

You have authorized me travel expenses for conducting business outside the City (e.g., county and state archives) but I have never charged for this.

One of my first expenses was to prepare a stamp marking all historical materials as property of the city. There will never again be confusion as to what the city owns or where it is located regarding the City Historian's holdings.

WHAT YOU REALLY ARE PAYING FOR:

I'm still answering questions as did my predecessors but at an increased rate (an average of two per day), but it's a lot more than that.

There's the research and writing, the promotional aspects: the book, WMHT "Our Town", The articles, tours, the 125th Anniversary activities, and much more, I'm very proud of all that and believe it helps in community identity and development, but even still, that's not what you are paying for. Consider it "bundled services."

You're paying for the support of core governmental functions. If you reduce our obligation to the public to even a more basic level than police, fire, sanitation, water, and – of course - safeguarding our heritage, the list might look like this: honest, just, responsive, informed and open. I help you with the informed and open.

Open government works backwards as well as forward: it's not just open meetings and FOIL, it's maintaining the record of government intact for all to see at all times. If you want to see how well you've been doing about this while you were just paying a stipend for someone to answer questions, go to the nursery, the basement, the annex, or open almost any closet in City Hall: you have lost all practical control over this information and periodically just lose the information as well. If you want to see how it is supposed to be done under state law and simply as a basic measure of good government, come to my office or the newly established, first ever, City Archives. If a citizen has a need for something as obscure as how sidewalk easements were apportioned in Port Jackson in 1878, you have the same legal obligation to tell them as if they are asking for current overtime expenses.

Informed government requires more than relying on the memory of the oldest living member or local talk show callers. Public officials, as well as the press and the citizenry, need a place to get answers to questions like: is there any restriction on selling City Hall? (Not on the deed, but the Common Council

declared the south lawn parkland in 1950); Where is Sudgen Street? (It was renamed Hibbard around 1915); We want to develop an emergency plan for natural and man-made disasters: what are the precedents? (here is the city civil defense plan from the height of the Cold War); Can rehabilitation tax credits be used to get the clock in the Clock Tower Building going again? (Yes: here's how); the list is endless.

My office – not just me – but the files and indices I am now building, and the standard I am setting for future City Historians, is your corporate memory, your in-house advisor on history, historical preservation, and related issues, and ensures the performance of your obligations under the law to maintain information and make it available, and act as a bulwark against the loss of the same.

That's where your nickel goes.

CONCLUSION:

For decades the City of Amsterdam shoveled ever increasing amounts of money (\$240, 800, 1200, 2400 dollars) against the position of City Historian with ever decreasing expectations.

That changed three budget cycles ago when you put the office on a reasonable but prudent financial basis.

Because of that, over the past two years we have accomplished more than was done in the last fifty. And we're well poised to continue that into the future with an ever- decreasing burden on taxpayers.

We're doing it through: accountability, openness, engaging citizens, sound planning and forecasting, and seeking opportunities to increase revenue and decrease expenses.

I'm not holding up my small city office as an example of how other departments and agencies should be run. On the contrary, I've been trying to establish a new standard that the City Historian – whoever he or she may be- must work as hard for each nickel, each fraction of a penny of taxpayer dollar as any other city employee.

Amsterdam is in trouble. We need every tool to help fix it. Especially if it is a tool that has proven its worth elsewhere, but we have neglected to use it in the past. We also need stability: when something is working, and beginning to make a difference, not to throw it aside for any transitory reason. We need to safeguard each and every success, and build upon them until we reach a tipping point that turns this ship around.

It's a false economy to suggest that we can ever go back to the days of paying a thousand or two thousand dollars a year as a stipend to answer questions because one historian is as devoted to history as another; we don't pay tax dollars for devotion: we pay them for results.

And the results under the old and new ways of doing business are as different as night and day.

That's the real bottom line.